

July 28, 2019

TUMC

Luke 2:41-52

Ephesians 4:1-8, 11-16

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### **On the Way: Views of Our Faith Journey**

As our summer theme tells us, we are On the Way. And I would like to add that *the Way, God's Way* is inclusive of all.

Paul, through the letter to the Ephesians entreats us: Lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, making every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. One body, One Spirit, One hope.

I want to talk about community, in the Body of Christ – the community I have found and the community I hope for.

Imagine Jesus and his parents walking to Jerusalem for the Passover Festival. I recall how Cedric told the story to us during the Good Friday Morning Service. He used a simple overhead projector and some line drawn figures. He really opened the stories of Jesus and I could suddenly picture this one. Think of your favourite retreat or family gathering combined with a long public walk – a walk where hundreds, or thousands of people are all there for the same reason. It is a festive occasion. A chance to talk with people you haven't seen for a while. There is joy and excitement in the air. All ages are present and as the group grows the pace slows. Children tend to clump with those their own age – younger ones perhaps

run in and out through the crowd and older ones – teens perhaps hanging back for a better look at the crowd and a chance to talk with peers a little farther from their parents. Having been on many walks of both protest and celebration – I can well imagine the freedom to just walk on, trusting that we are all going the same direction, and everyone is going to the same destination. We will find our friends and family, even our children, at the end.

[Slide – Cahoots website]

The Cahoots Festival is an annual festival of faith, social justice and DIY (do it yourself) that Peter Haresnape and Kathryn Gray and some other wonderful people organize. It gave me that feeling of trust in the community. Having met this community a few years ago when the children were younger and knowing that there was a leader for the inter-generational workshops that the other children already adored, I felt confident in just saying to my kids, who were 8 and 10 – stay with the group, I'll see you tonight – in spite of Cahoots explicitly saying the session leaders were not responsible for the children. But the activities were making shelters in the woods and playing kick-the-can and lighting the evening campfire...where else would my boys want to be. This is where the action was.

It was a prime example of the beauty of communities of faith. I repeat prayers of gratitude over and over again for the settings where the age divisions which are so rigidly enforced in school and kid's programming are dropped altogether and you see a gaggle of people ages 3 to 16 traipsing off together – giving piggy back rides, having races, and turning to wait for the youngest. You might call them the same generation, but in so much of our world they are strictly segregated into groups of just one- or two-year age spans.

There is much learning to be had, by just hanging out with those of another age. My children would never have learned how to make paper airplanes or treat a baby with gentle touches if it had not been for the time at church interacting with those who are both older and younger than they are. At Cahoots I stumbled upon another playing and learning occasion as the group of older children and teens gathered in the field. I heard someone suggest they make a pyramid and I thought I'd go over to take a picture.

[Pyramid 1]

Well I kept taking pictures. I recently read that we should think of the word “fail – F-A-I-L as First Attempt In Learning”

[pyramid 2, etc]

As you can see the first, second, third attempts – did not result in learning to create a full pyramid. The base was solid, but every time the one who wanted to be on top tried to climb up there, the middle fell apart as his feet jabbed into their sides. I am not sure if the children recognized all this, but it was a poignant lesson for me to realize that the pyramid didn't work until someone else *lifted* one of the smallest up onto the top. He could not do it on his own. It was only his humility to accept help, the gentleness of the older girls and the patience of all the rest who stayed steady that accomplished this:

[full pyramid]

Humility. Gentleness. Patience.

I have always sought inter-generational community because of the richness I find here. It is a big part of my persistence in the church. Here are a few more

examples – fond memories to share, in the hopes of encouraging more such occasions.

[Games afternoon]

A truly inter-generational games event with the Venture Club children and some willing seniors. I think it was originally planned as a picnic, but the eating on blankets happened on the basement floor due to inclement weather – just making the event all the more memorable. It was exciting for the kids to get to challenge the grandparents in the congregation to some fun and frivolous feats of coordination and concentration.

I enjoy these interactions most when we are out of our usual setting – perhaps just a testament to the fact that I love to be out in creation.

The annual TUMC retreat at Silver Lake is another such occasion -

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And the Harvest Festival – not to be missed if you, like me, crave one last bit of time “out of the city” before it turns truly cold.

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But these occasions are not automatically intergenerational, they are not automatically inclusive and welcoming of all. Much effort has been put into establishing the Good Friday Morning Service where this year Cedric told the stories of Jesus’ early life. Year after year this service has been both inclusive of all ages and meaningful – with storytelling, art, movement and music. The things that are different than most worship services are mostly things to accommodate and include the younger ones – it is done well so adults also find it worshipful.

Once we venture out of the city or even out of the building into the parks, we need to pay special attention to the older ones in our midst. Rides may be needed to get there, we need to consider that it is harder to walk when the ground is uneven, and there need to be activities to ensure that those who don't move as quickly or see and hear as well do not end up on the sidelines. As a fairly new member of the Congregational Life Committee which plans many of these events, I am preaching to myself here. And urge you to encourage people who might not think all congregational events are for them, to try us. Raise concerns if you or others have them and let's find solutions to the problems we encounter with being together.

The gifts of inter-generational community are so obvious to me. Just as Simeon and Anna blessed Jesus in the Temple when he was eight days old – the story just prior to what we read today – seniors in our church bless our congregations with their wisdom, stories, laughter, encouragement, prayers, organizing and much more.

As people have grown older in the church, looking after their changing needs, I hope, is an obvious priority for us. And looking after the changing needs of seniors can be a first step towards challenging ableism more generally and expanding our welcome. I met someone recently who made me stop and think about the communities that I am a part of. She overheard me talking to someone else about TUMC's inclusion statement. I had said that the welcome is clear in regard to sexual orientation and that the statement included many other things. This woman has a son who lives with severe intellectual and physical disabilities. She has become a passionate advocate for her son and for the role of communities,

particularly communities of faith, in making a place for those with profound disabilities and their caregivers. Knowing a little bit about her story, when she asked for a copy of TUMC's statement I hesitated. I know of the work this community has done in regard to welcoming those of all sexual orientations. It wasn't top of mind what work this community has done to be welcoming of all abilities to full participation. As I looked at the website now, I was reminded that more has been done than I first remembered. Beyond the building being fully wheelchair accessible, I had forgotten about the hearing devices and didn't know about the large print hymnals. A classic case of the privilege of ableism. I didn't notice what I didn't need. An article in *Mandate* magazine entitled "Accessibility in action"<sup>1</sup> says, "We all need to be each other's equity monitors. The first step is getting to know each other." This is part of humility. No matter how much we study an issue, we are never going to know how a particular condition or diagnosis affects each individual and what they want and need for full participation. The only way to know is to ask – respectfully, with an open mind, believing what people tell us of their own experience. Asking and listening is the humility to which we are called. The article goes on say that we should "aim for equity, live out our commitments, question biases, challenge assumptions, notice who is missing and value all voices."

Notice who is missing. I guess that is what I was doing as I hesitated. Other than a few seniors who have come to mobility or hearing loss late in life, I have rarely seen people with significant physical disabilities at TUMC. Why is that? What does that say about who we are as a community? As I mentioned several physical barriers have been removed in the building and assistive devices added. Could

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<sup>1</sup> "Accessibility in action." *Mandate*. Vol. 50, No. 2. Spring 2019. The United Church of Canada, p 16-17.

there be barriers in our attitudes? Ones we don't notice from positions of relative power and privilege? I don't know the answers to these questions. I really have only begun to think about them recently as my new acquaintance has caused me to consider. This is a first step for me along The Way of inclusion of all people regardless of abilities and I welcome your conversation on this issue.

The TUMC inclusion statement

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***TUMC is a friendly community that invites people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, gender identities, generations and abilities to full participation and inclusion.***

begins with an invitation to people of all cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This is something that my work and the situations I have found myself in have got me thinking about more often than ableism.

I was talking once with two women of colour who felt the discrimination of racism which was compounded by sexism in a certain setting. They told me briefly of their concerns and together we made a plan of action to get it addressed. As the conversation ended one of them said, "Why is it always the queer women who have to do this work?" She kindly drew the three of us together. I appreciated the inclusion but countered that I come from a place of privilege. My experience is that the white race card trumps in almost every situation and sadly their situation is very different from mine, even though we share an identity as women and queer people.

De-colonization is a theme that runs deeply through the social justice work that I do. This involves understanding the rights of Indigenous peoples; as well as how and why these rights are so often abused or not recognized. But there is a temptation sometimes to think that it isn't part of my personal life, that it is about government decisions, land use decisions, historical acts. It is tempting to think that I can be an advocate, and in doing that I am doing a good work *for someone else*.

[slide] Have you heard or read the quote,

"If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together."

Lilla Watson, Indigenous Australian activist.

And our liberation is bound up together. Colonization affects me just as much as it does any Indigenous person or person of colour, just in different or opposite ways.

I need to decolonize my heart. I am on a journey of beginning to understand my own white privilege and overcome my white fragility in an effort to lessen the racism I perpetrate or am part of.

The white privilege work is personal...it is about who I am in a racist society. It is about how I am shaped and privileged and perpetuating racism every day of my life. Colonization, residential schools, the 60's scoop, the current disproportionate foster care situation for Indigenous children, the murder and disappearance of Indigenous women and girls and two spirits, wouldn't have happened, wouldn't



be happening, without some people thinking that they were better than others. Without people thinking they deserved more...more land, more access, more tax revenue, more freedom...more than others. And every time that I take for granted that I deserve the education I received or have the right to enjoy travelling with a Canadian passport – I am reaping the benefits of a racist, colonial society and if I do not question those privileges which are not afforded to all, I am perpetuating that racism.

One Body. One Spirit. One Hope.

Some days it is overwhelming to think about trying to be inclusive in every way. I read a list of “inclusive best practices for churches” in the magazine article I mentioned earlier. It was a whole page, two full columns long and that author says they are still learning. I don’t think I will ever get to a place of understanding and recognizing all the things that perpetuate racism in different situations or all the things that exclude people because of their age or perpetuate oppression by ableism for different people. I do not have, will not have, all the answers. And so, I need to be humble, gentle and patient. Ready to ask and to listen. To be corrected and to change.

We must no longer be tossed to and fro and blown about by every bit of peer pressure, by the wind of the doctrine of discovery, by the trickery of white supremacy, by the craftiness of pitting one group against another. But speaking the truth – we are all made in the image of God, we are all equal – speaking this truth in love, we must grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly – where diversity of bodies, minds and spirits is the norm and all are welcome, included, respected – this promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love.